In conversation: Melissa Baksh interviews Suchitra Mattai

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ABSTRACT
On the occasion of the Guyanese-born artist Suchitra Mattai’s solo exhibition ‘Monster’ in London, the Art historian and writer Melissa Baksh interviewed Mattai about her work. This interview took place at Unit London in February 2022 and touched on themes such as the representation of women of the South Asian diaspora and how society ‘others’ and stigmatizes immigrants and those experiencing mental health problems.

KEYWORDS
Contemporary artist, Suchitra Mattai, India, Guyana, indenture, migration, Colonialism, language, craft, ritual

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Born in Guyana of Indo-Caribbean heritage, and now based in the US, Suchitra Mattai’s work addresses themes of colonialism and migration, and issues around gender, labour and family. As a multi-disciplinary artist, Mattai seamlessly blends painting, sculpture and installation, whilst employing craft-based practices and techniques once considered ‘domestic’, such as embroidery, weaving and crochet. The artist also incorporates found and worn objects—such as vintage saris—into her works, to weave together and celebrate stories that have not previously had a place in the history of art. Her work explores how individual and collective memory allow us to examine and reimagine dominant historical narratives, and calls upon her own family’s history of migration, as well as the history of nineteenth-century Indian indentured labour. Mattai—who calls herself ‘a storyteller of underrepresented people’—aims to give a voice to those who have been left out of written history, and in particular, to elevate the experiences of women of the South Asian diaspora.

Art historian and writer Melissa Baksh caught up with the artist at her solo exhibition ‘Monster’ at Unit London in February 2022. The exhibition explored how society ‘others’ and fears communities of immigrants and communities of the mentally ill, with the works residing at the intersection of memory, myth and fantasy.

INTERVIEW WITH SUCHITRA MATTAI

Melissa Baksh (MB): Suchitra, you were born in Guyana and now live in Denver, USA. Can you talk me through the various places you’ve lived, and how this has fed into your sense of belonging, connection and community?

Suchitra Mattai (SM): I was born in Guyana but left when I was quite young. I was born in Georgetown, as the eldest child. We lived with my grandparents, and I have some early memories of
the lush gardens and playing with my family; it was very family-centred. We moved to Nova Scotia for my parents’ education and lived there for seven years, so all of my elementary school years were there. After that, we moved to Boston, and we were there for my middle school years. And then my parents got jobs in New Jersey, so we moved there and I went to college there. Then I moved to New York, and then Philadelphia for graduate school. I was there for quite a while. Now I’m in Denver, but I’ve had the opportunity to live in Udaipur, Rajasthan. We spent over a year – on and off – in Paris and in France. There have been a lot of opportunities for travel in my life.

**MB**: Have you always had this desire to move around? Or has it been more circumstantial?

**SM**: I’m certain that it comes from the nature of my life and the way my parents have raised me, but ultimately, I’m a nomad. I’ve heard other Guyanese people talk about this, as well as people who have migrated from other places. I think it’s almost like no where ever feels exactly like home. There’s that ‘myth of home’, but for me it’s less about searching and just about being inspired, both as an artist and as a person. I’m really inspired by new environments, so I think that’s the impetus for me now.

**MB**: When you think of ‘home,’ what does it smell like? What does it sound like? What does it taste like?

**SM**: It smells like Lalah’s curry powder, which is one of the brands you get in the Caribbean for curry. It sounds like late 1950s / 1960s Bollywood as that’s what I grew up on. And also Calypso and Soca music, which I grew up listening to. It tastes like curry!

**MB**: With not being from one place, it’s like you feel a sense of discomfort, and you learn to get really comfortable with it.

**SM**: There is this sense that you feel like an outsider, which is an interesting place to be in a creative field. But then also, there is that idea that once you start feeling comfortable, you’re uncomfortable.
MB: And then you’ve got to move again!

SM: Which is what is happening right now.

MB: What did you do before you became an artist? What was your family’s attitude towards it?

SM: Since I was little, I wanted to be an artist. I was the first child, and so they kept a book, a journal, of everything I did. My dad said – in his Guyanese way – that all I wanted to do was ‘scratch on paper’ – to draw, basically! It’s funny because I knew I wanted to do that, but my dad would not allow me to apply to art school. I felt very conditioned to listen to them, as is the case in many immigrant families. And so, I went and did a degree in statistics and never used that. And then I started getting closer. I was like, ‘Well, maybe if I am an academic and I study South Asian art and the history of South Asian art, then I’m connected to this past.’ And I’m thinking, talking and writing about art. And so I went to do a PhD in South Asian art. And after the third year, I thought ‘What am I doing here?’ and I applied to grad school for art!

MB: How does your artistic practice offer a means to find placement in displacement?

SM: Through my practice I really feel that there is this quest for communicating the sense of displacement, but then within it also trying to carve out a space that one can consider home. The practice itself is dissecting and reimagining and retelling and reshaping myth and folklore and stories, but within those stories, there’s a desire to find some reconciliation. But it’s the displacement that, I feel, feeds the practice and feeds this desire to find placement – to have a place.

MB: In terms of the context of your work, you use the history of both European and South Asian art, and it challenges Eurocentric colonial narratives. What kind of things are you trying to say to people who are not aware of the system and legacies of indenture, and the complex colonial history of Guyana?
SM: I really want to bring that history to the fore, because it really is unknown. Every time I talk about Guyana or indenture the amount of people that know about it is very limited. I think there’s an importance and significance to unearthing those stories, to sharing them, to giving them value. We don’t have a lot of written history, but also telling those stories—based on oral tales and folklore—is so important. It’s about drawing attention to these histories in order to shape contemporary conversations about BIPOC people and various communities. It’s about revisiting this history, unearthing it, sharing it, so that we can tackle it, and provide more opportunities for people to talk about generational trauma.

It’s also really important for me, not just for my practice, but for myself. I’ve wanted to visit these places that were once ‘home’. I’ve never gone back to Guyana, and so it’s on my agenda for next year to revisit. I’ve been to India a lot of times and I always found that I wanted to go back. I grew up very Hindu and Indian, and very insular, and so there was this connection to India that drew me in first. And now I realize that it’s Guyana that’s where I’m from, and that I want to make that a priority going forward. Really, it’s since my practice has evolved, that the place itself has become so important.

MB: There are some vast differences in our experiences. I’ve never been to Guyana, even though my Dad is from there, so there is a sense of disconnect from the place. But whenever I meet people with Guyanese heritage, there is such a strong sense of connection. My parents have many dear friends from Mauritius and Trinidad—countries that share this history of indenture—and we (my siblings and I) grew up calling them ‘Auntie’ and ‘Uncle.’ They are like family. It’s something that is difficult to articulate to people—it’s a very specific experience.

SM: Guyana is a very multicultural place to begin with. There are a lot of second-generation or third-generation people in the
West who have one community to harken back to. Being Guyanese, for me, was not just about being Indian, it was about listening to West Indian music, and eating West Indian foods, and having familiarity with everyone who was from that area, and so you have this one community, and then another community, and then there are intersections. It’s much broader than having one kind of sense of identity. And I think people are very proud of their Guyanese heritage. I was recently talking with a writer from Guyana, and we were talking about how the Guyanese community in New York is very large. I read that it was the fifth-largest growing immigrant population in New York City proper. He was saying they always have these Guyanese Independence Day events, and everybody gathers in Brooklyn and there are always parties: there’s no formality, they’re so welcoming and there are people of different backgrounds but they’re all Guyanese. It’s kind of indicative of how people conceive of that identity.

**MB:** In terms of your artistic practice, you work across so many different mediums, materials and scales. Can you talk a little bit about this?

**SM:** I started as a painter and a drawer in graduate school. I had always wanted to bring in embroidery and other craft-based processes, and I did it a little bit in graduate school, but it wasn’t really welcomed. I reinvented and allowed my practice to really burgeon about seven years ago. I just allowed it to be more experimental. I see my practice as a conceptual practice, but it is very much rooted in materiality. I learned all these practices like embroidery, sewing and crochet when I was young, and I would make things all the time, so it became natural – when I allowed myself to be more intuitive – to actually have those practices be a part of my overall artistic practice. I feel like if you want to speak about the communities that I want to speak about, and the histories that I want to share, it’s important that there’s a connection and a correlation to the kinds of materials that were part of that
history too. I find that my practice is expansive and it’s because I want to tell the stories in as many ways as I can that feel both sincere and authentic. I’m very interested in honing new skills, and so nothing is off the table.

**MB**: I definitely feel that there’s been a craft resurgence in the UK in the past few years. Is it the same in the US?

**SM**: Yes, it definitely is. I’ve been collecting these objects and embroidering for years, and I never thought it would really be welcomed. But there’s so much love, acceptance and celebration of these crafts which are inherently from the domestic sphere and made by women. I’m really pleased to see to see this. I want it to be so part of the language of contemporary art that it doesn’t even stand out as something else, of something ‘other’, just like I want to be part of American society, and not stand out as something ‘other.’

**MB**: In terms of craft, the metaphor of weaving is really interesting, because yes, you have this link to craft, production, and materiality, and you spoke about a connection to your family and your early experiences. But then there’s also this idea of weaving layers of history as well. It’s so multi-dimensional. In terms of when you’re actually making, is there a kind of ritualistic aspect to it? I’m thinking particularly of your large works, which incorporate saris.

**SM**: Yes. I find that they provide a very meditative space, and there’s a sense of a kind of overarching plan that I have when I make those. But then I allow for this freedom of interaction between colour and intuitive form within the structure that I start with, but it is very ritualistic in a way. There are various processes: the saris are selected for the tapestry, they’re cut in a certain way— in a certain width – and then woven through a net, or through chicken wire, which I’ve done for sculpture. There’s certainly a kind of ritual of selection, processing, and then a very meditative – almost dance – when I do them. Sometimes I’m doing something, and I just take the same step back each time I
keep doing it. And there’s this repetition and meditation that happens.

**MB:** Where do you source the saris from?

**SM:** I get vintage saris from all over: mostly from India, but from my family, too, and my mom’s friends or other people. When you open the boxes up, sometimes they smell like curry, sometimes they smell like perfume! You feel so connected to whoever wore them because they’re worn garments, they’re of the body, and they have history within them. I’m not trained as a fibre artist, and so the process I’ve engineered or created to weave these are very much invented for me, by me, to serve this purpose, and I call them ‘weavings,’ but I don’t even know if someone who was a trained textile artist would say they’re weavings.

**MB:** Do you ever listen to music when you work?

**SM:** I do. I listen to everything from Bollywood to all sorts. I have a very wide range of music, but I will confess that I’m one of those people that can listen to the same song over and over again! It kind of feels almost like you’re in a trance or something, and you’re doing this repetitive action, and the music playing enhances that whole experience.

**MB:** How long will you spend doing this?

**SM:** If I have a deadline, I can do this for fourteen hours a day.

**MB:** Your ancestors travelled the Middle Passage from India to Guyana, and you also made this journey. Can you talk about the history of indenture within your family?

**SM:** Indenture started around 1838 and ended in 1917, and so various members of my family were engaged, and were brought at different times, so there are so many different stories. My grandfather came with his parents, and they actually went back after their five years, and then they came back, so he’s kind of multi-migration. But then my grandfather on the other side, I think his great grandparents that came in the first wave. The interesting thing is that it was never spoken about in my family. I didn’t know
anything about it until I started researching. I knew a basic sense of things like why, for example, my family was in Guyana, but I didn’t know the depths of that history. But, for instance, we barely knew why we didn’t speak Hindi.

MB: Is your work a way of connecting and also working through intergenerational trauma?

SM: I think so. We reconcile certain parts of our practice and the relationship of it to ourself or to the self as artists, but I think I can see how that is part of it. I haven’t fully figured out a way to articulate it other than through the work. I think retracing those steps and connecting back to the ocean, to the travels, to the indenture, very much becomes a retracing of the path of my ancestors, because I felt really connected in doing so.

MB: You have spoken about how members of your family’s past were ‘ruptured’ by indentured labour. I found the word ‘rupture’ so powerful and visceral. In your practice you juxtapose different materials and objects; found and domestic objects, for example. Is this a kind of rupture?

SM: Yes. In the sari weavings, for example, there might be these ruptures within the work in a formal sense, but then with the other objects I collect and use, they have a past, they have a history, or they might refer to a history. I use a lot of objects that allude to a European history circa 1800, whether it’s paintings of pastoral scenes, landscapes, or prints of ‘the other’ within colonies, or just objects that have that collective memory of being from a particular era, especially that of colonialism. I take that history, I use it to tell a different story; rupturing that history, creating space for a new story, to sit by its side. It’s like taking those objects that have the history and rupturing that history in order to create new space for other histories.

MB: Where does your interest in mythology come from? When did it start?

SM: My grandmother on my dad’s side; her stories were fantastical and sometimes scary, and they initiated my interest in
folktales. I’ve read and enjoyed world folklore for years, and found not just connections, but differences. It’s because they speak about our anxieties, and also about what is ‘other;’ what is to be feared, what is to be reconciled with. I think that those kinds of stories reveal a lot about a culture. On another level, when you’re trying to unearth or share histories that haven’t been shared, you look to what’s shared from generation to generation. And it’s those kinds of stories that have lived on, through my grandparents, through family. For a lot of people, they become embedded, and they become a kind of resource for connecting back with our own culture, our own history and our own genealogy, our own ancestry. But it’s also that liminal space, that’s part fantasy, part realism. I feel like in some ways my work operates in that space. It’s a space that I feel comfortable in. I’m looking at these histories and sharing them. But really, it’s an effort to celebrate a cultural past that was never celebrated and also to provide a sense of not just validity, but of joy in recognizing those identities; not just for Guyanese people, but for everybody who has pasts that haven’t been shared, or histories that aren’t permitted to be shared in the West. It’s about making space for people to celebrate their pasts and their histories. And so folk tales and myths can be altered, shifted, and invented in a way to provide that space for that joy.

**MB**: You use religious imagery in your work, namely figures from Hinduism. You’ve told me your mother is very religious. Where do you place yourself with regard to this faith and culture? And where does your work sit within this?

**SM**: I grew up pretty religious, and there’s always a kind of centring that I can’t escape, that lies within Hinduism. I no longer consider myself ‘religious,’ but I think there are some core thoughts and practices that are very important to me. When we talked about the meditative process of weaving, there are certain values and ideas that pervade my life and work that emanate
from there, but through my work, when I use goddess figures, it’s really about power and a patriarchal system that I want to critique, and ultimately, to empower women. When I use these goddess figures, it’s not so much an homage to religion, but rather a site for critique.

**MB:** If your ancestors saw your work, would they think it was sacrilegious?!

**SM:** Definitely some of it. I want to critique the culture I’m from, but I also want to give voice and empower people, and especially women from that community. I’m speaking about a community I know, but as an artist, I want my work to be universal, and if it can help people of other immigrant communities or other communities at large, that’s what I’m interested in. I think some of my more religious family might be like, ‘What is she doing?’ But I’m okay with that. That’s what artists have to do.

**MB:** Your exhibition at Unit London, ‘Monster’, confronted how society ‘others’ immigrant and mentally ill communities. Why the desire to connect the two groups?

**SM:** It’s a personal connection. I am bipolar, and I’ve been this way my whole life. I feel as though more and more it’s becoming so obvious that the ways in which we ‘other’ and treat communities of mentally ill people, especially those who find it difficult to participate in and by society’s norms; that in a lot of ways we ‘monster’ them. Monsters exist within the realm of folklore and they occupy that space of what makes us anxious and what makes us have fear. I think we fear the mentally ill and I think we fear immigrants and people who are different to ourselves. I see those connections across those communities and in how Western society deals with those communities. There is also this allusion to the idea of how women are often treated as hysterical. When people are different and when we don’t understand their behaviour, it’s easier to categorize them as mentally ill than to take the effort to understand and accept modes of behaviour that are simply different.
**MB:** Can you talk a bit about the motif of hair in your work?

**SM:** It is part of the ritual of being a South Asian woman. I remember my mom braiding my hair. It provides a sense of order to the hair that we have. To me, it harkens back to that ritual between women and children and girls, but there’s also something disconcerting about hair, especially when it’s not attached to a head or a person! Sometimes I use hair in my work as a kind of tool or foil. The sari braids are alluding to hair as well. In one sense there is this ritual between women, and in another, a darker, more mysterious element.

I have made a lot of work where I’m revealing and concealing faces as a matter of having agency and not. But in ‘A World Without Secret Knows No Pain,’ 2021, the fur becomes hair, but it’s red, and it becomes blood, and then it becomes grotesque, but there’s also something quite luxurious and ‘fashion’ about it. I want the work to have all of that. I want there to be this sense of joy within the work, and healing, but one can’t do that without addressing the dark.

**MB:** Water imagery also comes up a lot in your work.

**SM:** Totally. Nova Scotia is on the Atlantic, Guyana is on the Atlantic, New Jersey is on the Atlantic, New York is on the Atlantic. It’s basically a migration up and then down the Atlantic. Even with the tapestries, I’ve tried to create that tumultuous yet peaceful space, full of depth, where it becomes a metaphor for where so many of the passages and experiences of my family.

**MB:** You mentioned your feeling of disconnect from Hindi—the language that your family would have spoken. In some ways, are your works like a conversation with this past that’s not spoken, but rather, experienced?

**SM:** Yes, ‘Mother Tongue,’ 2020, really delves into this idea of authenticity, and what a loss of language feels like within a family. It’s interesting because it wasn’t until I asked so many questions that my grandfather told me that if you wanted to have a job in teaching or in the government, the British didn’t
want us to know Hindi. It was about power and control, and what they considered to be ‘proper.’ It was a way to control culture and people. After a while, my grandparents knew Hindi, but they never spoke it. A lot of people can relate back or connect back to a past through language. Once that language is lost, it takes away this sense of authenticity. When I go to India and I don’t know how to speak Hindi, I really feel this alienation from this past that I think I’m so connected to. This loss of language leads to a kind of disconnect and a lack of authenticity in the eyes of people from the ‘homeland,’ and that’s very interesting to me. The whole work is really a question of what is authentic and how you tell an authentic story. I included a lot of personal things, like my mom’s dupatta, and I took all the table runners from my wedding and sewed them together to create the tapestry. The table runners were made by my aunt, so there’s this passage of objects and materials, but stories too. By using these personal objects, it’s like a reclaiming of what is authentic, what is identity. The figure in the centre is an Indian Kathakali dancer, but he’s dressed to be Arjuna from the Bhagavad Gita, so there are these layers of mediation and storytelling that happened within that work.

**MB:** Language can also be a barrier to people experiencing art. Labels, for instance, can be didactic, sometimes problematic and even racist. Your titles are so playful and intriguing; for me, you are a storyteller.

**SM:** Twenty years ago, I would never title my works. I needed to find my authentic practice. I later realized that the words can be poetic; they don’t have to lead a viewer in a particular direction, but they can be this additive bonus level of communicating a story. It’s not something that is necessarily telling the exact story of the work, but rather something from the past that parallels the work in some way, and parallels the experience that I want to communicate in the work. Sometimes I’m talking about a very dark thing and there’s a lighter title. In a way, it’s finding light within this
darker past. If you can encounter that darkness, but yet survive it, you really find a sense of light.

**MB:** Do you ever incorporate text into your works?

**SM:** I have, but in a very abstract way. I’ve made collages in small and large with these Sanskrit pages that have handwritten texts that I got in India 20 years ago; I have a stash and I feel very connected to them. Somebody sold them to me in India, and I had them for years. One day I asked my mom: ‘How do you feel about me collaging with these and using them?’ and she said: ‘They’re sitting in your basement, and nobody can see them. Nobody can feel the power of them. If you make art with them: all the better.’ When she said that I felt she was right, and so I have created installations with that text.

**MB:** In works such as ‘Seen and Heard,’ 2021, you incorporate sculpture into your work. How do you feel about memorials? What should we do with memorials that commemorate colonizers and racists? What do you feel about the violent destruction of artworks that are inherently violent themselves?

**SM:** It’s a really hard question, because it’s something I don’t have an answer to, but I’ve been thinking about it because of what’s been going on in the public sphere. On one level, I feel uncomfortable with the destruction of any historical object, monument or work. On another level, as a brown woman, I understand the complexity of the feeling of having these around us. I wonder if there are ways to complicate and address those terrible histories without destroying the objects themselves.

**MB:** That’s what you’re doing with ‘Seen and Heard’?

**SM:** Those kinds of objects might not allude to a particular history or a particular year or time, but more of an era. When you see busts, you think of the history of art, the early stages in the history of art. And so you take it, and interrupt it with that woman’s figure. Now, the funny thing about that bust of the South Asian woman is that it’s from a 1950s series, where there were these busts of different women from different places. It was
almost like an essentializing, colonial thing in itself. But I’m using both objects, which have these very different pasts, to tell a story that is more about empowering immigrant communities.

**MB**: Yes. For me, it’s also a destabilization of the power of those objects.

**MB**: What do you hope your work says to young people of Guyanese heritage, or Indo-Caribbean heritage, living outside of those places?

**SM**: I think it’s really difficult in those communities (for both historic reasons that relate to colonialism and also for patriarchal reasons that relate to that culture) for young women to feel empowered. And I feel as though, on one level, I hope that some young girl out there can know that other people have shared in the experience of immigrating and feeling the alienation and othering, and that you can find a path to being understood. And then on another level, as an artist, for people in a lot of immigrant communities, you don’t feel like you can embark on creative fields; they’re for people who have money and who exist in other communities. I feel and I hope, that if you walk into a gallery or museum and you see artists who are like you, you start feeling like you can engage in those activities as well. I think creativity – whether it’s art, making music, writing, etc – is important to our culture at large, and especially to communities who have felt trauma. I think that knowing that you can do it too is important. I want people to feel like ‘I can do that, too!’

**MB**: How does the optimist in you envisage the near future of the art world, particularly for women and people from diasporic communities?

**SM**: We have a lot of challenges ahead of us, but the optimist in me really feels like we’re getting somewhere. I think more women and more people of colour are being collected by museums and being exhibited in galleries. There are always these challenges of tokenism that we have to figure out, but to me, it
begins with permitting people into those spaces. Token or not, I feel as though we’re on our way. I feel as though just the opening of those spaces that are usually so shut off to immigrant communities and people of colour and women make me hopeful that those doors will be flung even more open and that eventually, you’ll see all communities on equal footing in this art world that we live in and work in.